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Reflections on an international teaching experience

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I am writing this looking out of the window at a blue Ethiopian sky, surrounded by the hubbub of Ethiopian student voices in a room at the University of Addis Ababa. I am working here with Ethiopian academics who are finalising their assessment (a journal article) and supporting portfolio so that they can proudly add the Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education (PGCHE) awarded by Leeds Metropolitan University to their (in many cases lengthy) list of academic achievements.

With other members of the course team I have been delivering the PGCHE throughout this past year on a Department for Business, Innovation and Skills-funded Education Partnerships in Africa (EPA) project. Students on the course are colleagues from five of the rapidly expanding number of public and private universities in the country. They are tasked with not only completing the course but then developing PGCHE programmes fit for the Ethiopian context. Quality is assured at present in Ethiopian higher education (HE) provision via a high level of prescription. Curricula for all disciplines are handed to academics for delivery by Government and are heavy on content. Under a new national policy, teaching quality is assured by requiring teachers at all levels, from primary school through to HE, to undertake the same teacher training course. So the students' task is not simply to write a new PGCHE course; they also have to convince senior university managers and Government ministers that there is a need for a new dedicated and accredited course for university educators.

My experience here has made me acutely aware of how easy my life is as an

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academic in the UK. I take so much for granted, not the least of which are the relative autonomy I have to design and deliver modules the way I want to and the ability to access information on the web very quickly with a few clicks (there is no broadband in Ethiopia).

It has also stimulated me to revisit some fundamental questions about academia, academics and professional practice that I would like to share in this reflective piece under two main themes. One of these is about concepts of diversity and the way I address these in my teaching.

The second is about the extent to which there is a common cross-cultural understanding of what it is to be an academic. Is it a job with clear descriptors of what that job entails or a vocation? Would the roles and responsibilities of academics and the activities we could be expected to engage in be described similarly by academics across the globe? At another, perhaps more philosophical level, is it possible to articulate a set of personal characteristics and attributes that define us? Is there a moral and ethical imperative that we share in terms of the social impact we endeavour to achieve? Do these skills, attributes, practices and beliefs transcend subject disciplines and the political, social and cultural contexts we find ourselves working in?

I have probably always thought so, but working in Ethiopia, which is in the early stages of expanding its educational infrastructure, and discussing these issues with my colleagues here led to reflection on differences between where the balance lies between job and vocation in Ethiopia and in the UK. That academics should be generators of knowledge (or at least capable of doing so) seems to be tacitly understood within both cultures. Being an academic in any discipline is about having a curious mind that is constantly formulating questions about the way the world works, but also an open, receptive mind that is prepared to accept a multitude of possible answers. Academic practice is about putting each of those possible answers up to careful scrutiny and challenge (the research process) without preconceptions or prejudice until one answer emerges that for now seems more plausible than others.

Probably less tacit is the extent to which academics should be able to communicate that knowledge, not just the content of it but the awareness of its potential to be applied in a way that ultimately leads to greater social good in global contexts. Most universities within the UK consider it to be the job of academics to prepare our students to have the drive and the skills, armed with that knowledge and understanding, to be able to be effective in any employment area they find themselves in (Knight, 2002).

However, to be an academic in the UK – and probably in any highly developed economy – means that we rarely have the time or perhaps the inclination to reflect on the extent to which we are doing that to the best of our ability. Traditionally we are appointed to our posts because we have been resilient enough in the education system we have experienced as students to have made it to degree level and beyond. We have also demonstrated a fair level of competence at the knowledge generation part of being an academic and have the list of research publications to prove it! There is often an assumption that we will also be fairly competent at the knowledge transmission side of it too. That assumption is probably right as far as mere transmission goes.

When I started teaching Biochemistry, fresh from my PhD in Neurochemistry, the sea of faces sitting expressionless in front of me as I somewhat didactically attempted to teach them a little about how enzymes work was a bit of a reality check but also a revelatory moment. What could I do to get them to love Biochemistry as much as I did and to see its potential as another explanatory framework for supporting human health? In other words, how could I be a better teacher?

While there is undoubtedly a need to have discipline-specific expertise to be a good teacher (Becher, 2001), there are also characteristics, attributes, skills and practices needed to facilitate learning that transcend disciplinary boundaries (Knight, 2002; Race, 2010). The development of these and the

learning theories that underpin them form the basis of PGCHE courses.

The requirement for academics to demonstrate competence in teaching in the context of the 21st-century environment in which higher education exists by undertaking a professional qualification in teaching (such as a PGCHE) is now embedded in all UK universities. That context is largely one of increasing numbers and diversity of student cohorts who are now paying consumers of our 'products' and are increasingly demanding improvements in quality via mechanisms such as the National Student Survey (NSS). I help to deliver our Leeds Met version of the course and very much enjoy the opportunity to share with colleagues views of what being a 'good' teacher is all about. Many of my colleagues embrace the challenge (because challenging it most certainly is) of critically reflecting on their current skills as a teacher and further developing those skills. The perception that courses such as these do lead to enhanced learning has been documented (Gibbs & Coffey, 2004; Norton et al, 2010). However, for others, having to take the course seems an affront to their concepts of their perceived efficacy as an academic (Samuelowicz & Bain, 2001).

Hayes (2002) has argued that such courses are a solution to a non-existent problem:

"There is no reason to think that, in general, university teaching is inadequate. There is no reason to think that there is a need to reform, reorganize, and make accountable the sort of teaching that goes in universities. There is no reason to think that courses of teacher training are necessary for university lecturers. There is no reason to think that such training programs will benefit university lecturers or their students."

While there is most certainly a need to establish further an evidence base that commitment to the professionalisation of university teaching is impacting on student learning, feedback from student surveys such as the NSS provides

evidence that that teaching in many respects could indeed be better.

So how do my colleagues (and now friends) here in Ethiopia view themselves and their role? Education, so recently a rare opportunity for most, is seen as a privilege and has high social value – whereas arguably in the UK it is taken for granted and is even resented by some. Ethiopian children in rural areas still walk miles daily to get to school – a kind of reverse truancy. They try to get there at all costs rather than trying all ways of getting out of attending!

Among the academics I have met here in Addis, there is most definitely a shared sense of the capacity of shared knowledge to bring about social change by empowering individuals and communities to take greater control of their future. There is more of an immediacy to this aim in Ethiopia, as evidence of poverty and unequal access to opportunity is still apparent in every facet of day-to-day life whereas it is more hidden in the UK. Ethiopian academics know they are making a difference and there is evidence of that, at least in the developing cities where universities and enterprise thrive and children can see the seeds of a brighter future – and can glimpse how they can get there.

Heading through the city in late afternoon we were jostled by a tumble of babbling, playful, happy, thriving children just leaving school for the day. To me the children seemed to sum up the optimism, enthusiasm and *joie de vivre* of the people of this amazing country. Cynics might think they were happy, as UK children would be, because school was over for the day but that is not the impression I had – it was all bigger and bolder and more animated than that and very different from the end of school days in England that I have seen. They were very pleased to greet me to test their English and told me they were extremely happy to have spent the day learning. Universities and their academic staff have a high profile here as there are relatively few of them. Being an academic in Ethiopia means giving those children aspirations of achievement.

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In contrast, here in the UK, although undoubtedly some students are inspired to choose to come to university to study in a discipline they love, with increasing student numbers many more seem to end up with us fairly passively as a natural progression of a path they were put on. Do we as academics do enough to act as aspirational role models so that more of the young people that come to us actively rather than passively choose their path?

Although this is a generalisation, to me there do seem to be differences too in the attitude of academics to their own continuing development via courses like the PGCHE in the UK and in Ethiopia. Without doubt for most academics on the course in Ethiopia the glass is half full and they cannot believe their luck at having the opportunity to top it up. During our intensive sessions (the course is taught en bloc from 9am – 6pm on four separate weeks) their thirst for discussion and debate on problems and possible solutions has an intensity and urgency that is both challenging and stimulating. There is no passive learning here. They let nothing go by. Everything is deconstructed and questioned for understanding and application to their context. I feel both exhausted and exhilarated at the end of each day of teaching, while looking forward to the next.

It has been hard for colleagues here to fulfil the requirements of the course. Things we take for granted in the UK are daily trials for them. They have far less autonomy to implement curriculum change. Like all academics they often bemoan their lot but do not give in to inertia, doing what they can in their classroom interactions with often astonishing results, for instance negotiating the teaching and assessment strategy with students taking a second-year research methods course.

They have extremely limited access to the internet and even when it is available it is routinely interrupted by power cuts and there is no fast broadband, so accessing e-journals and indeed any sources of information demands patience, determination and time.

Their portfolios evidencing their activities do not have the same range and depth of content as those of colleagues in the UK – far less is downloadable – but asking them to expand on that evidence verbally revives my faith in academia as a vocation, with all that that implies, rather than a just a job. They love telling me about how this worked but that didn't, and why and how when they deliver again they will do this and maybe that because students say they like this way of learning better. I found this dialogue a great way to ensure that a portfolio of evidence is exactly that, and hope to assess all portfolios by discussion from now on. Quality triumphs over quantity!

Returning to my first theme, working here has given me a new insight into the assumptions I make about the diversity of student populations. The faces that surround me here on the campus of Addis University are all 18–21 years old and all black – a seemingly homogenous population. However, walk outside the campus onto the streets of Addis and what is immediately obvious in this developing nation are the startlingly inequalities of access to the most basic of human needs: food, shelter, clean water and healthcare. This is the country that just 25 years ago inspired Live Aid. There are young mothers and their starving children living on the pavement intermingling with well dressed and affluent office workers and business men and women. The students at the universities here come from that incomprehensible range of backgrounds. It really brought it home to me how easy it is to judge from appearances when faced with diversity we know little about.

Ethiopian history and culture and therefore Ethiopian senses of identity are predominantly formed by deep religious belief systems but these are incredibly diverse even in geographically close regions. I have learnt from my colleagues here that although Ethiopian university students may look similar, their apparent homogeneity holds great cultural and ethnic diversity. The main challenge they have to face as teachers is in dealing with the diversity of life experiences that their students have had before they arrive, and it is that more than anything else that informs and guides their academic practice on a daily

basis. Because of my international experience I will never again make assumptions of commonality among my student cohorts. Just because they are, for example, white and 18 years old does not mean that they share a common culture, history or set of values. Their experiences before they come to us may be as diverse as those of Ethiopian students. Inequalities in the way children experience the UK education system perhaps do not tax academic practice so much because they are far less obvious than in Ethiopia, but that does not mean they do not exist. Those experiences will have impacted on their expectations of what higher education is all about and on their concepts of self-efficacy and we arguably need to do a lot more in our teaching to understand and support that diversity of experience. There is evidence that retention and progression of students throughout their first year and into their second year is considerably better for students from more disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds and from ethnic minority groups, for example (Yorke & Longden, 2004; Powdthavee & Vignoles, 2009).

Working in developing nations is not an easy life: as soon as you walk outside your hotel, things like basic sanitation and the health and safety of the environment on the streets that we take for granted in the UK cannot be relied upon. However, the rewards are potentially extremely high – and for me were transformational especially, as I have tried to describe, in changing my concepts of diversity. I hope I have helped my colleagues here to reflect on their practice within their context, and boosted their self-efficacy to change what needs changing (for example a reliance on written examinations as their main assessment tool) for the better. I know that the confidence and optimism in a better future shown by my Ethiopian colleagues and the wonderful Ethiopian people has been inspirational for me

This article has sought to present something of the excitement, challenge and learning which I have derived from working outside my everyday cultural context. I can only commend this dimension to internationalisation to other colleagues. It may not be 'easy', but theory and experience tell me that transformative learning never is.

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